

Are We Comfortable with God's Mercy and Compassion?

The Book of Jonah / Jonah 3:10-4:11

Introduction:

This morning, we come to the end of the book of Jonah, which concludes with a conversation between its two main characters, Jonah and God. This conversation, highlighting the continued rebellion in Jonah's heart and God's compassion and mercy, points to the struggles our feeble human hearts will always have in understanding the ways of our Lord. This leads us, then, to examine our own response to God's mercy and compassion. As we finish this book, I want to conclude with four overarching truths that I see from the book of Jonah for us to know and respond to. To give space for that, let's dive right in to examine this final story in 2 scenes. First, in Jonah 3:10-4:3, which shows us how,

Jonah Becomes Angry at God's Self-disclosed Character

Pastor Adam wonderfully unpacked verse 10 of chapter 3 last week, so we won't cover it today. However, we should note its direct connection to verse 1 of chapter 4. Look at Jonah 3:10-4:1, "When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil way, God relented of the disaster that he had said he would do to them, and he did not do it. But it displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he was angry." Verse 1 of chapter 4 sets up a contrast between Jonah's response, and the responses the people of Nineveh and God. Do you remember the response of Nineveh? They believed God and the King called for them to turn from their evil. Notice again the king's hope in Jonah 3:9, "God may... turn from his fierce anger." Nineveh turned from its evil and God turned from His anger, yet Jonah, in contrast, buckles down and becomes exceedingly displeased and angry. Why was Jonah so displeased and angry? Pay close attention to what Jonah does next in verses 2-3, "And he prayed to the Lord and said, 'O Lord, is not this what I said when I was yet in my country? That is why I made haste to flee to Tarshish; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from disaster. Therefore now, O Lord, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live.'" We finally learn why Jonah attempted to flee from God's calling and notice this is disclosed through a prayer by Jonah. This is the second mention of Jonah praying, bringing his prayer in Jonah 2:1 to remembrance as we consider it. In chapter 2, Jonah gave a prayer of thanksgiving for the mercy and salvation God provided for him, ending with a focus on the hope of God's steadfast love, and declaring that "Salvation belongs to the Lord!" The connection to that prayer begins to draw out a disconnect in Jonah's heart. Note also how Jonah speaks of this being what he said to the Lord back in his country. This lets us into a previous prayer Jonah made before He tried to flee to Tarshish. Now, pay close attention to the word "for," showing us this is Jonah's reason for anger and fleeing. Look again at what Jonah says, "for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from disaster." Jonah quotes the beginning of God's proclamation of Himself to Moses in Exodus 34:6, where He says, "The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness." Jonah's reason for his anger now, and trying to flee before, is God's own disclosure of His nature and character to Israel. He knew this response is consistent with God's character. Then, we see his displeasure is so great that he asks God to take his life, assuming it is better for him to die. That seems extreme, doesn't it? Isn't this aspect of God's character what Jonah was exceedingly thankful for, and rejoiced in, in chapter 2? It was this very truth about God that led to Jonah being saved from dying at sea. There is a clear disconnect in his heart between his two prayers. What causes this disconnect? The answer is likely found in the understanding of Hebrew word for "steadfast love" found in both prayers. This is a term that specifically focused on God's special love toward Israel throughout the Old Testament. The proclamation of this love, by God, was first given to Moses as Israel was coming out of Egypt to reveal His covenantal love for the chosen people of Israel and was repeated on several other significant occasions. Church, ironically, this declaration came right after the people of Israel worshipped the golden calf and God relented of the disaster He was going to bring on them.

Jonah should be rejoicing in God's steadfast love, but he isn't. Why? Because it is being shown to people outside of Israel, and more specifically, Israel's enemies. As Eric Redmond points out in his commentary, "It would be characteristic of God to be merciful to His covenant people. But God now directs His covenant-keeping love at people outside of the covenant—wicked, Israel-hating people" (Eric Redmond, *Exalting Jesus in Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk*, 54). This means that Jonah, a national hero in Israel, was used by God to extend God's mercy to Israel's enemies. That is why he thinks it would be better for him to die than return to Israel. Jonah's personal comfort and expectations of judgment were not met, and instead of his own experience with mercy influencing his response, his concern for comfort and hatred of his enemies cause him to be angry at God's mercy being extended to others. The next scene, in verses 4-11, reveals God's continued compassion towards Jonah, showing how,

God Exposes the Hypocrisy of Jonah's Anger

As I have studied these verses, I have been struck by the care and intentionality of our gracious and merciful God. I recounted several times when my responses to my children have not been nearly as wise and loving as this. Our God is a gracious and merciful God. Start in verses 4-5, "And the Lord said, 'Do you do well to be angry?' Jonah went out of the city and sat to the east of the city and made a booth for himself there. He sat under it in the shade, till he should see what would become of the city." Our Lord starts with a question to probe Jonah's heart, and we see right away that there is no response from Jonah. Instead, Jonah acts like a pouting toddler and seems to think his anger and prayer may solve his problem. So, he goes out of the city, makes himself a shade, and waits for the Lord to act, likely hoping to see the destruction of this city. Yet, notice how the scene unfolds in verses 6-9, "Now the Lord God appointed a plant and made it come up over Jonah, that it might be a shade over his head, to save him from his discomfort. So, Jonah was exceedingly glad because of the plant. But when dawn came up the next day, God appointed a worm that attacked the plant, so that it withered. When the sun rose, God appointed a scorching east wind, and the sun beat down on the head of Jonah so that he was faint. And he asked that he might die and said, 'It is better for me to die than to live.' But God said to Jonah, 'Do you do well to be angry for the plant?' And he said, 'Yes, I do well to be angry, angry enough to die.'" Three times we see God's sovereign control over creation as He appoints a plant, a worm, and a scorching east wind to accomplish His will. All three reveal the Lord's care for Jonah. First, the plant is provided to save Jonah from his discomfort. Now, the word for "discomfort" is the same word used for "evil," when the Lord said Nineveh's evil had come before him in Jonah 1:2. There is likely a double meaning here. Jonah is both being saved from his discomfort in the sun by this plant, and the Lord is seeking to save him from the evil in his heart. Note how this provision by God moves Jonah from being exceedingly displeased to be exceedingly glad. However, God is not done. Next, the Lord appoints a worm to kill the plant, removing the shade, and then a scorching east wind to actually increase Jonah's discomfort. This shows God's ultimate goal is not to provide comfort from the sun but to rescue Jonah from the evil in his heart. Jonah then asks to die again, and God repeats His question from verse 4 word for word with a slight change, "Do you do well to be angry for the plant?" God's first question was whether Jonah was right to be angry about Him not destroying Nineveh. Now, God asks if it is right for Jonah to be angry about Him destroying the plant. Both questions point to the truth that Jonah's anger is directed at God. This time Jonah pridefully answers God, "Yes, I do well to be angry, angry enough to die." The tension this presents is palpable, setting up an expectation of the Lord's response. Look at God's response to Jonah in verses 10-11, "And the Lord said, 'You pity the plant, for which you did not labor, nor did you make it grow, which came into being in a night and perished in a night. And should not I pity Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than 120,000 persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also much cattle?'" The Lord goes straight to the heart, as He draws Jonah's attention to his pity on a plant perishing that he had no involvement in cultivating. Note the word "perishing." This is the same word used by mariners in Jonah 1:6 and 14, and the king's cry in Jonah 3:9. Which perishing should concern Jonah more? God, then, compares Jonah's pity on one plant with His pity on a great city with more than 120,000 people.

Further, God describes the people as not knowing the evil of their own hearts. Then, God includes, “and cattle” to drive the question home. How could Jonah have such concern for a plant, and no concern for people who don’t know better and even cattle? Church, our concern for the environment should never outweigh our concern for lost and dying people. God’s response discloses the heart of Jonah, exposing his focus on self, foolish attention on worldliness, and lack of love for others. If his heart was focused on the glory and majesty of God, he would rejoice at the repentance he had seen and called the city to worship Yahweh, but he didn’t because of the evil in his heart, which the Lord is working to rescue him from. Now, pay attention to the abrupt ending of this beautifully crafted book. We never discover Jonah’s response to the Lord’s final question. It is just left hanging there, leaving us to see the question as directed towards us just as much as it is towards Jonah, inviting personal reflection that comes consistently through this book. So, let’s conclude our time in this short book and ask what the Lord intends for our hearts through it.

4 Overarching Truths from the Book of Jonah

Let me suggest 4 overarching truths I see from this book and some ways we can consider responding to them. The first truth I see is that,

1) God Has Compassion on All Peoples

This book has been a consistent display of God’s compassion on all peoples, showing repeatedly, as Jonah prays, that He is “a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love” to people from every nation tongue and tribe. In chapter one, the Lord shows compassion on Jonah through His pursuit of him and displays compassion on the mariners as the sea ceases its raging in response to their prayer. Compassion is shown again towards Jonah as God saves him from death through the appointment of a fish to swallow him up and deliver him back on the shore in chapter 2. The people of Nineveh, and even their cattle, are recipients of God’s compassion as they turn from their evil ways in chapter 3. And God’s compassion is displayed a third time towards Jonah in chapter 4 as the Lord moves to rescue him from the evil in his heart. Church, we cannot escape our Lord’s compassion for all peoples. Do you take joy in His compassion being for all nations and peoples? Even our enemies. Or are you like Jonah, and wish He wouldn’t show compassion to some people? The second truth I see is that,

2) God’s Mercy Extends to the Worst of Sinners

Jonah is a rebellious prophet, the mariners were idol worshippers, the people of Nineveh were an evil and perverse people. The mariners turned to the Lord after trying to call out to their fake gods and found mercy. Jonah turned to the Lord at his lowest point of descent away from the Lord’s call and found mercy. The people of Nineveh turned to the Lord following God’s declaration of destruction and found mercy. Every human character in this book is marred by sin, and in its grip, yet each of them turns to find mercy from God. This means it is never too late to turn to the Lord for salvation. The description of God in Jonah’s final prayer is echoed by the prophet Joel in Joel 2:12-13 to the people of Israel in their rebellion, saying, “‘Yet even now,’ declares the Lord, ‘return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; and rend your hearts and not your garments.’” Return to the Lord your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love; and he relents over disaster.” Church, this word spoken to Israel in their rebellion is just as true for us. Do you see your sin and need of mercy? Do you see those around you as people who need mercy? God’s mercy comes to all who place their trust in the finished work of Jesus Christ. It is His perfect life, His death on a Roman cross, and His resurrection that has secured the constant stream of God’s mercy to all who believe. Here is the beautiful thing, you don’t have to wonder if God will turn from His fierce anger like the king in chapter 3. Jesus paid the debt for all who trust in Him. All that is required is to believe, turning from your sin and trusting in Jesus. The third truth I see from this book is that,

3) Our Hearts Can Easily Deceive Us

Jonah’s heart deceived him. He knew the character and the call of God, even banking on it in his time of need. Yet, he thought he could presume who God’s compassion and mercy should extend to.

He assumed there were people too far gone for God to show mercy, and his anger and perception of justice led him to be opposed to God's plans and purposes. Church, I have wondered how often we fall into that same trap today. How often do our hearts deceive us, causing us to miss what God wants to do in and through us to share the glory of Christ with those around us? Do we look at the world, captured by the false ideologies of our day, and see them as those "who do not know their right hand from their left"? I wonder if we sometimes fail to share the gospel because we are consumed by judgment of others sin or discouragement of societal challenges. So, let me ask you, is more of your time spent speaking against the evil of this world? Or speaking of the mercy and grace of God in the gospel? This leads to the final overarching truth I see, that,

4) God's Mercy Towards Us Should Lead to Humility, Compassion, and Gospel Proclamation

It is glaringly obvious that Jonah failed to truly understand the depths of God's mercy towards him. If he had, he would have gone to Nineveh, called for repentance, and rejoiced at the salvation of others. But in failing to understand how much mercy he had received, he stood against God and His purposes. Church, the truth is none of us can rightly live under God's commands without His grace and the power of His Spirit that comes through trusting in the death and resurrection of Jesus. The world around us is following the course of Satan, blinded to the truth, and their only hope is for God to shine the light of the knowledge of His glory into their hearts through the gospel of Jesus Christ. We would be no better off than the world if it wasn't for God's mercy towards us when we didn't deserve it. It is only by God's grace that we respond to the truth of His ways. And that grace came through someone, at some point, proclaiming the gospel to you. Here is what I have wondered lately. Are we approaching the world around us in reverse steps, trying to get them to obey God's Word without giving them the only hope they have for succeeding in that? When we recognize we only have what we have by the grace and mercy of God, we will be humble and compassionate towards others, seeking to point them to Jesus Christ. So, church, share the good news of the gospel, share the hope of Christ, share the glory of God, and trust in God to do a work on people's heart through it because "Salvation belongs to the Lord," and that salvation comes through the proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Then, after people's eyes are opened to the truth, and they turn to trust in Christ, we can and should disciple them to maturity, not the other way around. Let the mercy of God in the gospel sink deep in your heart and the primary thing out of your tongue.

Conclusion:

As the worship team is coming to lead us in our extended time of response through song, what is the Lord calling you to believe, desire, or do in light of the book of Jonah? Take what we have seen from this final chapter, or the truths we have seen from this whole book and ask God to work in your heart. Let His Spirit lead you to respond to the truth of His Word. During this time, you are welcome to sit and reflect, or stand and sing as the Lord leads. You can also come and kneel before the Lord to cry out to Him or come and receive prayer from a member of our prayer team who you will find worshipping on the front row, or at the bottom of the stairs in the back. And if you have yet to trust in the work of Jesus on the cross, turn today and ask God to forgive you of your sin and pour out His mercy in your heart.

Would you pray with me as we respond to His Word?